THE RESTORATION OF LITHUANIAN INDEPENDENCE

During World War I Lithuania was the battleground of Russian and German armies. Not even Belgium was more devastated. But there was a feeling in the air, that, in spite of wearisome German occupation, a new day was coming. Against German opposition, a National Assembly met at Vilnius in September, 1917, and demanded the restoration of an independent Lithuanian state. The Assembly formed a National Council, which, to the great displeasure of the Germans, met in Vilnius on February 16, 1918, and signed the Lithuanian Declaration of Independence.

Lithuania had declared her independence. The Germans still occupied the country; there was no money, no administration, no army — and a war-worn land. But true freedom was at last in sight — and that was a heady wine! The war ended and the Germans withdrew. Against innumerable odds a government was formed, an administrative apparatus established, volunteers flocked to the army. Lithuanians from all over the world came most generously to the aid of their mother country. The land still had to be defended against marauding German-White Russian adventurers, against Soviet aggression, and finally, against the old ally, Poland, bent on forcibly renewing the old union. But by the end of 1920 there was relative peace and Lithuanians could set to work to make up for the wasted hundred years.

Lithuania became a member of the League of Nations in 1921. She had a recognized place among the free nations of the world. A democratic republic, with legislative powers vested in the parliament, and executive in the president and cabinet of ministers, all her citizens were equal before the law, without distinction of race, sex, or religion. Predominantly Catholic, her constitution guaranteed full freedom of worship to all religious denominations.

Unused as they were to governing themselves for such a long period, the Lithuanians proved able to manage their affairs, whether political, economic, internal or external. Agriculture developed strongly after an intensive land reform was carried out. Industries, mainly based on agriculture and forestry, grew rapidly. Exports, expanding year by year, always surpassed imports. The public debt remained small, taxes were low, the currency was sound. There were new roads, bridges, railways. A modern seaport, Klaipeda, was developed from a small timber

and fishing port. Devastated towns were rebuilt, modern buildings rose in town and country districts alike. On the outskirts of towns, factory and other workers were given lots and building material so they might have their own homes at very low cost, to be repaid to the state over a period of 35 years. Hospitals, sport, youth and health centers spread throughout the land. Numerous organizations came into being to meet the needs and interests of different groups of people.

But what most gladdened the hearts of the Lithuanians, so long starved for a wider culture, was the proliferation of museums and libraries and the establishment of numerous schools on many levels. They particularly rejoiced over the schools of higher learning: universities, conservatories of music, academies of fine art, pedagogy, commerce, agriculture and forestry. Literature, art, music, the opera, the ballet, the theatre, flourished. The Lithuanian Opera came to be recognized as one of the best in Northern Europe, the National Ballet had successful seasons in London and Monte Carlo.

Lithuania participated in various world and lesser international fairs of the time and always came away with highest awards. The appearances of her folk dance and folk song teams in festivals in foreign cities always drew acclaim. Last, but not least in the eyes of her young folk — Lithuania became the basketball champion of Europe.

The Lithuanians worked hard and dreamed of an ever brighter future. The dream was rudely shattered after only twenty-two years of truly remarkable achievement.

THE FIRST SOVIET OCCUPATION

Two supposedly irreconcilable enemies — Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia — decided the time was propitious to acquire more territory. In August and September of 1939 they concluded an official non-aggression pact and also unofficial secret pacts for the takeover of the Baltic States by Russia and the partition of Poland between the two. World War II was the signal for the land grab.

The Baltic States had several solemn treaties with the Soviet Union which ensured their integrity. But the last German Kaiser